March 4, 2024

The Honorable Bernie Sanders
Chair
Senate H.E.L.P Committee
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Bill Cassidy
Ranking Member
Senate H.E.L.P Committee
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Virginia Foxx
Chair
House Education & Workforce Committee
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Bobby Scott
Ranking Member
House Education & Workforce Committee
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chair Sanders, Ranking Member Cassidy, Chair Foxx, and Ranking Member Scott:

As Congress finishes the Fiscal Year 2024 appropriations process, we write to urge you to include aid to states in the final spending package to help them address challenges stemming from the delayed implementation of the redesigned Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®). As you are aware, the FAFSA is historically released in October each year, but the 2024-25 FAFSA was released in late December. The new FAFSA has been plagued by a series of technical problems that have frustrated users and prevented some of them from completing the form. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) has moved back the date of transmitting Institutional Student Information Records (ISIRs) to schools and state agencies from January to the first half of March. From there, it will likely take ED several weeks to deliver batches of ISIRs to their intended recipients.

We are greatly concerned about the implications of these glitches and delays for college access. According to the National College Attainment Network (NCAN), the percentage of high school seniors submitting a FAFSA is down nearly 40% from last year, and almost 50% for low-income and high-minority schools. If FAFSA submission rates remain significantly below last year's rates, this would be a lost opportunity for hundreds of thousands of students seeking higher education, with lasting negative implications for state efforts to meet economic and workforce needs. If FAFSA completion —and postsecondary education attendance—do not revert to normal rates by later in this cycle, the supply of students developing knowledge and skills could be depleted at a time when there are over 8 million unfilled jobs in America.

Further, we remain concerned about the ability of state agencies and institutions of higher education to process and package student financial aid in such a short period. Many financial aid offices are already stretched to capacity—particularly at institutions serving large shares of low-income and first-generation students—and these delays will only exacerbate their challenges in providing and packaging timely aid information to students. Delayed financial aid information could result in some students choosing not to attend college next fall.

States can play a central role in helping resolve this crisis. State leaders have a clear understanding of the needs of institutions of higher education within their borders. With federal resources, states can work collaboratively with public and private institutions to develop statewide plans to meet the demands of financial aid offices in the months ahead, provide technical assistance to institutions, and target support to expand capacity at under-resourced institutions.

Federal support could advance statewide strategies to help more students realize the benefits unlocked by completing the redesigned FAFSA. State agencies have significant experience with FAFSA completion programs. The focus of these resources would be on assisting this year's high school graduates who were frustrated by FAFSA challenges.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter. If you have any questions, please contact either Tom Harnisch, SHEEO vice president for government relations, at tharnisch@sheeo.org, or Frank Ballmann, NASSGAP director of federal relations, at frank@nassgap.org.

Sincerely,

Robert E. Anderson
President
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